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Physical and Psychological Violence at the Workplace

Abstract

[Excerpt] Key findings

- Workplace violence is a social phenomenon of a certain magnitude. Overall, approximately 6% of European workers report having experienced some form of workplace violence, either physical or psychological, in the past 12 months. Non-physical forms of workplace violence (such as verbal abuse, threats of physical violence and unwanted sexual attention) experienced in the past month are reported by 12% of workers.
- Overall, levels of reported psychological violence are higher than those of physical violence. Of the diverse types of psychological violence, bullying or general harassment is more prevalent than sexual harassment.
- There are variations in exposure to workplace bullying between European countries. On the whole, exposure to bullying or harassment is comparatively greater in France and the Benelux countries, while reported levels are lower in southern and eastern European countries. The country variations of reported exposure may reflect different levels of awareness of the issue and willingness to report, as well as of actual occurrence.
- Major differences in the incidence of workplace violence are apparent across sectors. Exposure to all forms of violence tends to be concentrated in sectors with above-average contact with the public. The level of physical and psychological violence is particularly high in the health and social work sectors as well as in public administration.
- Women, particularly younger women, appear to be more subject to sexual harassment in the workplace than men.
- Both physical and psychological violence have serious implications for the health and well-being of workers. Workers exposed to psychosocial risks report significantly higher levels of work-related ill-health than those who are not. The most common reported symptoms are stress, sleeping problems, fatigue and depression.
- Exposure to psychological violence is correlated with higher-than-average rates of absenteeism. Although psychological violence is, by its nature, more cumulative in its impact than physical violence, its negative health effects measured in terms of absenteeism appear to be as detrimental as physical workplace violence.
- Work environment factors contribute to the incidence of workplace violence. For example,

high levels of work intensity (tight deadlines, working at very high speed), a high number of work pace constraints and working in frequent contact with customers, clients and other non-colleagues are associated with a higher likelihood of being bullied.

Keywords

Eurofound, workplace violence, Europe, psychological violence, physical violence

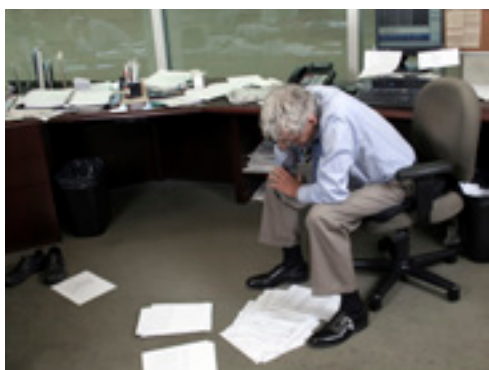
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Policy context



Violence at work can manifest itself in many ways. The variety of negative behaviour covered under the general umbrella term of workplace violence is so large and diverse that it makes it difficult to adopt a unified and integrated approach dealing with all the forms of workplace violence. This is, indeed, a key challenge that policymakers are confronted with.

While the existence of physical violence at the workplace has always been recognised, psychological violence has only relatively recently attracted public attention and common concerns as expressed by workers, trade unions, employers, public bodies and experts across a broad international spectrum.

In 2001, the European Commission's Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work, in its 'Opinion on Violence at the Workplace', drew attention to the emerging importance of psychological violence and acknowledged that 'physical violence can have consequences that are not only physical but also psychological, which can be immediate or delayed'.

More recently, the Community strategy 2007–2012 on health and safety at work (COM (2007) 62) highlighted 'the emergence of new risk factors (violence at work, including sexual and psychological harassment)'. The

same policy paper strikes a warning note for policymakers by saying that 'problems associated with poor mental health constitute the fourth most frequent cause of incapacity for work [...]; the WHO estimates that depression will be the main cause of incapacity by 2020'.

In response to increasing concern for the dimension and severity of psychological violence, a number of European countries have introduced new legislation or incorporated new provisions in existing legislation to tackle the problem. Other countries have opted for non-regulatory instruments (such as codes of practice and provisions in collective agreements).

There are various reasons for this increased public and government recognition of psychological violence. In the first place, numerous research studies have indicated that psychological violence, particularly bullying, is a social problem of considerable magnitude, with detrimental effects for the health and well-being of workers. Evidence comes also from administrative data showing that an increasing incidence of work-related health problems is due to psychological and psychosocial rather than physical causes. Additionally, several court rulings in different countries have recognised psychological violence as an occupational risk, equal in importance to other hazards in the work environment.

Racial harassment: : an unwanted conduct related to racial or ethnic origin [...] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

Source: Council Directive 2000/43/EC implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin.

Sexual harassment: any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature [...] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Source: Council Directive 2002/73/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions.

There is also a growing recognition that all forms of workplace violence imply an attack on a person's dignity, and are likely to constitute a risk to their health and safety. As can be seen from many definitions in European and national legislative and policy documents, the focus of attention in relation to workplace violence has widened to encompass dignity at work, human rights and combating discrimination. At EU level, this trend is exemplified by the adoption in 2000 and 2002 of EU 'anti-discrimination' directives specifically addressing racial and sexual harassment at the workplace (Council Directive 2000/43/EC and Council Directive 2002/73/EC). The definitions provided in these directives constitute the common basis for all national legislation in the area. Both directives indicate that any forms of racial and gender discrimination and sexual harassment are violations of the dignity of the person.

Aside from the directives mentioned above, no specific European legislative provisions refer explicitly to violence and bullying at work, though it is considered by many to fall implicitly within the scope of the EU framework directive on health and safety at work dating back to 1989 (Council Directive 89/391/EEC).

In its 'Resolution on Harassment at the Workplace 2001/2339 (INI)', the European Parliament urged the European Commission 'to consider a clarification or extension of the scope of the framework directive on health and safety at work or, alternatively, the drafting of a new framework directive as a legal instrument

to combat bullying and as a means of ensuring respect for the worker's human dignity, privacy and integrity'.

In January 2005, the European Commission consulted the European social partners – the employer body UNICE (now BusinessEurope), the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME), the European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) – on the usefulness of an initiative in the field of violence in the workplace, including bullying. It emphasised the negative consequences of psychological violence for the psychological and physical well-being of workers and drew attention to research findings estimating a 1–2% fall in productivity due to psychological violence (Eurofound, 2006a).

Following this consultation, the European social partners agreed to deal with the issue through the existing structures of European social dialogue. The autonomous agreement on harassment and violence at work signed by the European social partners in April 2007 is testimony to the shared awareness about the nature and extent of the problem. The agreement states that these problems are 'a mutual concern of employers and workers, which can have serious social and economic consequences' and aims to significantly increase the awareness and understanding of workplace harassment and violence between employers, workers and their representatives.



The agreement acknowledges that harassment and violence can take many different forms, including physical, psychological and/or sexual harassment. It is recognised that workplace violence can be perpetrated through a range of actions, from minor cases of disrespect to more serious acts of harassment or violence and consist of either one-off incidents or repeated and systematic patterns of behaviour.

On 17 March 2008, ETUC also published an interpretation guide to the 2007 framework agreement intended to support ETUC member organisations in its implementation, and to

allow better monitoring and evaluation of the results achieved.

Building on the 2007 cross-sectoral framework agreement, in September 2010 eight European social partner organisations¹ operating in a range of sectors adopted multisectoral guidelines to deal with work-related violence and harassment perpetrated by third parties such as clients, customers, patients or students (Eurofound, 2011a). This reflects a growing awareness and recognition that workplace violence or harassment can be carried out by people other than the target's colleagues.

¹ The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR); the Conferation of European Security Services (CoESS); the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE); the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU); the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE); EuroCommerce, which represents retail, wholesale, and international trade in the EU; the trade union federation UNI-Europa; and the hospital and healthcare employers' association Hospeem.

Key findings

- **Workplace violence is a social phenomenon of a certain magnitude.** Overall, approximately 6% of European workers report having experienced some form of workplace violence, either physical or psychological, in the past 12 months. Non-physical forms of workplace violence (such as verbal abuse, threats of physical violence and unwanted sexual attention) experienced in the past month are reported by 12% of workers.
- **Overall, levels of reported psychological violence are higher than those of physical violence.** Of the diverse types of psychological violence, bullying or general harassment is more prevalent than sexual harassment.
- **There are variations in exposure to workplace bullying between European countries.** On the whole, exposure to bullying or harassment is comparatively greater in France and the Benelux countries, while reported levels are lower in southern and eastern European countries. The country variations of reported exposure may reflect different levels of awareness of the issue and willingness to report, as well as of actual occurrence.
- **Major differences in the incidence of workplace violence are apparent across sectors.** Exposure to all forms of violence tends to be concentrated in sectors with above-average contact with the public. The level of physical and psychological violence is particularly high in the health and social work sectors as well as in public administration.
- **Women, particularly younger women, appear to be more subject to sexual harassment in the workplace than men.**
- **Both physical and psychological violence have serious implications for the health and well-being of workers.** Workers exposed to psychosocial risks report significantly higher levels of work-related ill-health than those who are not. The most common reported symptoms are stress, sleeping problems, fatigue and depression.
- **Exposure to psychological violence is correlated with higher-than-average rates of absenteeism.** Although psychological violence is, by its nature, more cumulative in its impact than physical violence, its negative health effects measured in terms of absenteeism appear to be as detrimental as physical workplace violence.
- **Work environment factors contribute to the incidence of workplace violence.** For example, high levels of work intensity (tight deadlines, working at very high speed), a high number of work pace constraints and working in frequent contact with customers, clients and other non-colleagues are associated with a higher likelihood of being bullied.



Exploring the concept



Concepts and terminology

The term ‘workplace violence’ commonly includes both physical and psychological violence. When defining physical violence, the distinction is often made between real experiences of actions and threats of violence.

The incidence of such threats often tends to be higher than exposure to actual physical abuse. According to the fourth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS; Eurofound, 2007c), about 6% of European workers reported being exposed to threats of violence, as against 5% reporting having been personally subjected to actual acts of violence in the previous 12-month period.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that different forms of violence may interrelate and overlap and it is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between one type of violence and another. For example, physical violence may be a feature of both bullying and sexual harassment. Therefore, a degree of caution is necessary in drawing a dividing line between physical and psychological violence.

The definition of psychological violence is even more challenging and elusive than the definition

of physical violence and the borderline between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is not clear-cut. Broadly speaking, psychological violence encompasses a wide range of disruptive behaviour, including bullying, harassment, coercion, verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

Across Europe, different terms are used for hostile and negative behaviour at the workplace. Reflecting differences in the efforts to grasp the more subtle forms of harassment and violence at work, such behaviour has been conceptualised as ‘moral harassment’, ‘mobbing’ or ‘bullying’.

Previous Eurofound research (2003) points to an assimilation of usage of terms defining negative and abusive behaviour in the workplace as well as a convergence in the actual behaviour associated with these terms. This may be an indication of the emergence of a general shared understanding of workplace violence. At the same time, however, specific national terms have gained currency in certain countries, for example, *pesten* in the Netherlands, *harcèlement moral* in France, *molestie* in Italy, *coacção moral* in Portugal, and *acoso* in Spain.

In some countries, there has been a call for clarification of the terminology and policy or legislative documents have been amended accordingly. For example, in Ireland, the revised code of practice on workplace bullying has introduced a distinction between bullying and harassment. While bullying is defined as 'repeated inappropriate behaviour that undermines [the person's] right to dignity at work and aimed at a person or group to make them feel inferior to other people', harassment, including sexual harassment, is based on one of the nine grounds to prevent discrimination listed in the Employment Equality Act 1998 (Eurofound, 2007a). In other countries, criteria have been established as to what exactly might constitute psychological violence. This is the case for Poland, where relevant provisions were introduced into the labour code in 2004 (Eurofound, 2008b) and subsequently amended to include criteria defining this negative behaviour.

In spite of the many difficulties in defining such a complex phenomenon, terminology differences are becoming less of an impediment. Whether or not there is a convergence or divergence of terms used to define workplace violence,

particularly regarding bullying or harassment, it is recognised that the psychological processes as well as the outcomes (diminished well-being for the affected workers) involved in such abusive behaviour appear to be very much the same.

Trends and patterns in the experience of workplace violence

Time trends

The exposure of workplace violence has been charted and monitored by Eurofound in successive waves of the European Working Conditions Survey from 1995 to 2010¹. An analysis of time trends in the different waves of the EWCS shows a downward trend in levels of exposure to physical violence. In 2010, 2% of European workers said they had experienced physical violence at work in the previous 12 months, as against 4% in 1995, and 5% in 2000 and 2005. For workplace harassment or bullying, reported levels of exposure have gone down one percentage point since 2005. (Eurofound, 2012)

It may be the case that levels of reported violence at work represent only a small fraction

Table 1: General EWCS data (1995–2010) on workplace violence

% of all workers in the previous 12 months	1995 EU15	2000 EU15	2005 EU15	2005 EU27	2010 EU15	2010 EU27
Physical violence	4	5	6	5	2	2
Threats of physical violence	-	-	6	6	5*	5*
Bullying or harassment	-	-	5	5	5	4
Intimidation	8	9	-	-	-	-
Unwanted sexual attention**	2	2	2	2	2	2
Sexual harassment	-	-	-	-	1	1

Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 1995–2010

* The timeframe of the question has changed from 12 months in 2005 to 1 month in 2010.

** Used as a proxy of sexual harassment until 2005. Also, the timeframe of the question has changed from 12 months to 1 month in 2010.

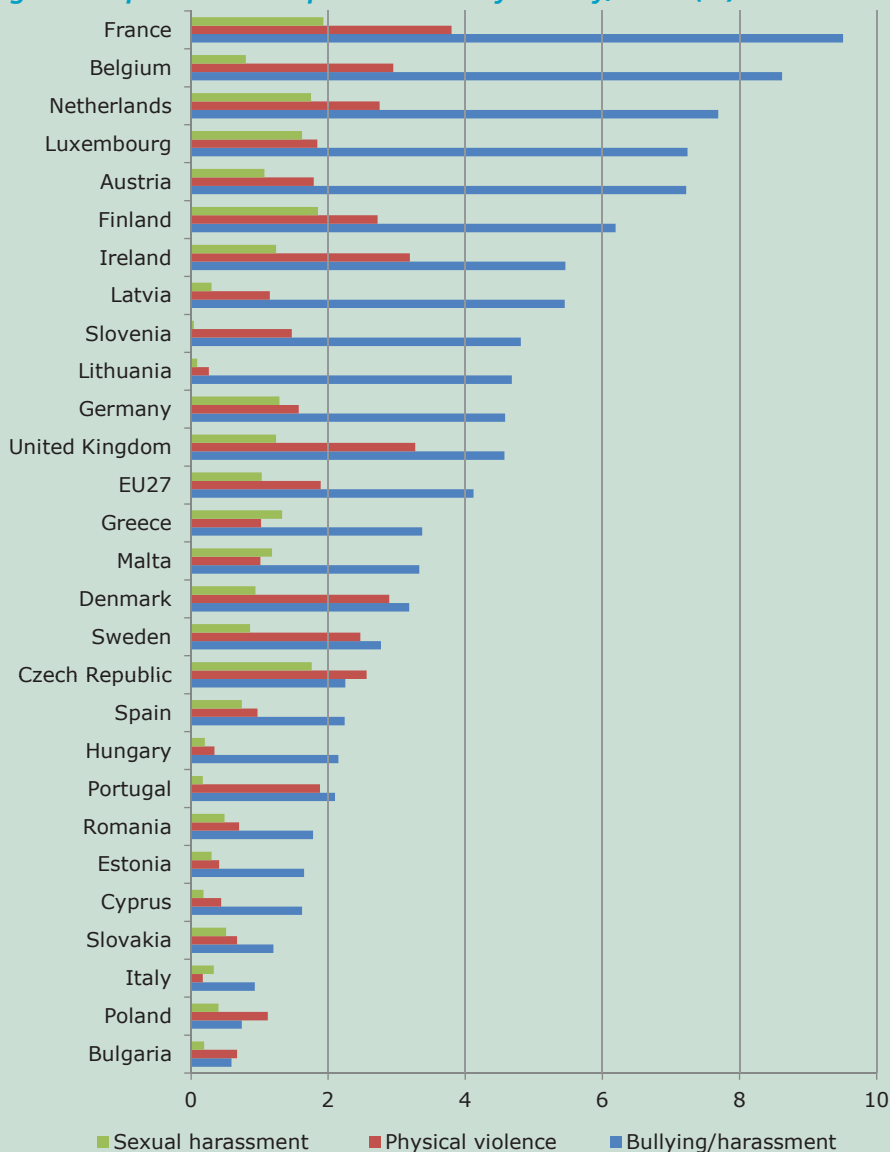
¹ No time trends are available for threats of physical violence as the question was introduced in the survey questionnaire for the first time in 2005; in the most recent survey the timeframe of the question changed from 12 months to 1 month. The question on physical violence was also changed in 2010; the two questions on physical violence at the hands of colleagues and non-colleagues were combined into one question that does not make any distinction between the originators of the violence. The question on unwanted sexual attention was changed in 2010 (the timeframe was changed from 12 months to 1 month) and a new question on sexual harassment was introduced.



of its actual occurrence; the results from the EWCS rely on the willingness of respondents to disclose the problem and identify themselves as a victim or target. It is important to point out that selection bias may also lead to underreporting.

We may assume that many workers subjected to serious instances of physical or psychological abuse are likely to have already withdrawn from the labour market and therefore not to appear in the survey sample.

Figure 1: Exposure to workplace violence by country, EU 27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

Variations from country to country

From the country breakdown of the fifth EWCS (2010), it can be seen that in general, exposure to workplace harassment or bullying is higher in France and the Benelux countries while the countries with the lowest levels of exposure to bullying are Bulgaria, Poland and Italy (with reported levels below 1%). It should be noted that in most countries, there has been a decrease in reported levels of both bullying and physical violence. The incidence of sexual harassment in Europe is very low; the average is 1% and the reported levels do not exceed 2% in any Member State.

These relatively low figures require some qualifications however. Reporting levels of psychological and physical violence emerging from the EWCS should be understood in the context of a broad European survey on working conditions. Surveys investigating the phenomena in greater depth may generate higher estimates.

The level of reporting may well reflect cultural and linguistic differences also and not only actual prevalence. Particularly, concepts and definitions are often loaded with cultural significance and ingrained in deeply rooted stereotypes and traditions that, in some cases, may lead to underestimating the phenomenon or to tolerance of unacceptable behaviour. For example, in some countries (such as some southern European countries), the concept of bullying commonly implies weakness on the part of the target and may lead to reluctance to reveal the problem. In the case of sexual harassment, targets are sometimes reluctant to label their experiences as sexual harassment because they may not consider such acts as serious enough or may feel ashamed of reporting the problem.

It is not easy to identify with any degree of certainty those countries that have the highest incidence of workplace violence, particularly bullying and sexual harassment – different statistical sources tell different stories.

Previous Eurofound research indicates that the prevalence of bullying varies greatly, with percentages ranging from 1% to above 50%,

depending on the phrasing of the question, timeframe indicated, occupation or sector, as well as country (Eurofound, 2003).

In other words, the empirical methods used to investigate the phenomenon differ amongst themselves and tend to generate wide variations in outcomes.

Eurofound's European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO) provides further evidence of prevalence rates of different forms of workplace violence, at least in some European countries. The following briefly outlines the findings from national studies reported in the observatory.

The fifth Danish Work Environment Cohort Study, carried out in 2010 by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment, revealed a significant increase in the number of people reporting being exposed to bullying (13%), physical violence (8%) and threats of violence (11%) as against the figures reported in 2005 (10%, 3% and 6% respectively) (Eurofound, 2011b).

The 2008 Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey provided a more nuanced picture on the prevalence of bullying in Finland than that emerging from the fourth EWCS. According to the national survey, more than two out of five (44%) Finnish workers reported that bullying took place at their workplace at least occasionally, while 6% of respondents reported constant bullying at the workplace. When asked about their own experiences, the incidence rates drop; only 4% of workers reported being personally subjected to workplace bullying at present, 13% had been bullied previously at their current workplace and 8% at a previous workplace (Eurofound, 2009a).

As indicated by the fifth EWCS, another country with higher-than-average reported exposure to bullying is the Netherlands. Using a similar format of questions to that in the Eurofound survey, the Dutch Working Conditions Survey (Nationale Enquête Arbeidsomstandigheden, NEA) has been charting the incidence rates of different forms of workplace violence since 2000 (Eurofound, 2006f). The 2009 NEA found that workplace violence, intimidation, unwanted



sexual attention and bullying can be perpetrated by colleagues or supervisors or by a 'third party' such as a pupil, client, passenger or patient. The latter is relatively more prevalent. Some 19% of all Dutch employees reported being a target of intimidation by a third party during a 12-month period, whereas intimidation by colleagues was reported by 11%. One in twenty Dutch employees reported receiving unwanted sexual attention from a third party and 2% from colleagues (Eurofound, 2010b).

It should be noted that until 2004, the concept of intimidation (by colleagues) was used in the Dutch survey to refer to acts of bullying, in the same way that it was used in previous waves of the EWCS. However, it has been suggested that intimidation refers more to threats of physical violence. Therefore, a new indicator of bullying was introduced in the Dutch survey in 2004. According to the latest wave of the NEA, some 7% of Dutch workers reported being the target of bullying by customers in the previous 12 months and another 8% were exposed to such negative behaviours at the hands of colleagues. Some national studies have used a more 'objective' measurement of bullying gathered by means of the Negative Acts Questionnaire. Unlike the surveys mentioned above, respondents only

have to indicate how often they experience a range of negative behaviour by others. Although some negative acts are not in themselves bullying, they indicate the risk that bullying may occur. Negative acts become bullying when they are directed towards the same person systematically over a certain period of time.

Following this method, a 2009 Danish study conducted by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment (Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Arbejdsmiljø, NFA) revealed that 10.8% of Danish respondents are exposed to bullying. While some 1.4% of the respondents experience bullying at least once a week, 9.4% say that they are sometimes bullied (Eurofound, 2010a).

A similar approach was followed by research conducted in Belgium (Eurofound, 2006c), which distinguishes six clusters of respondents: those who are 'not bullied' (35.3%); the 'limited work criticism' cluster (27.7%); those with 'limited negative encounters' (16.5%); those who are 'sometimes bullied' (9%); those who are 'work related bullied' (8.3%); and 'victims' (3.2%). The workers who are 'sometimes bullied' report exposure to a wide range of bullying behaviour, although most such behaviour

occurs only occasionally, while the group of highly exposed respondents systematically indicate a high level of exposure to the work-related negative acts.

With regard to other forms of harassment, the fifth EWCS found that overall only 1% of the workforce report having experienced sexual harassment in the previous year. By contrast, drawing from findings of national studies reported to EWCO, high incidence levels have been found in a number of EU countries. In a 2006 survey conducted in Slovakia among 1,041 economically active adults, a total of 66.4% of respondents had at least one experience of sexual harassment at the workplace, 36.7% had personal experience of such harassment and 55.5% had indirect experience. High incidence rates were also found in a Czech survey (1,025 respondents) conducted in 2005 by the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. According to the survey, one quarter of the Czech population has either experienced sexual harassment personally or is aware of its existence in their workplace. In Slovenia, a national survey carried out in 2007 by the government's Office for Equal Opportunities found that 27% of the respondents (out of a total of 1,820) had been subjected to verbal sexual harassment (such as unwanted messages or emails), followed by another 15% reporting experiences of non-verbal sexual harassment

(like gestures or sexual exposure) and physical harassment respectively.

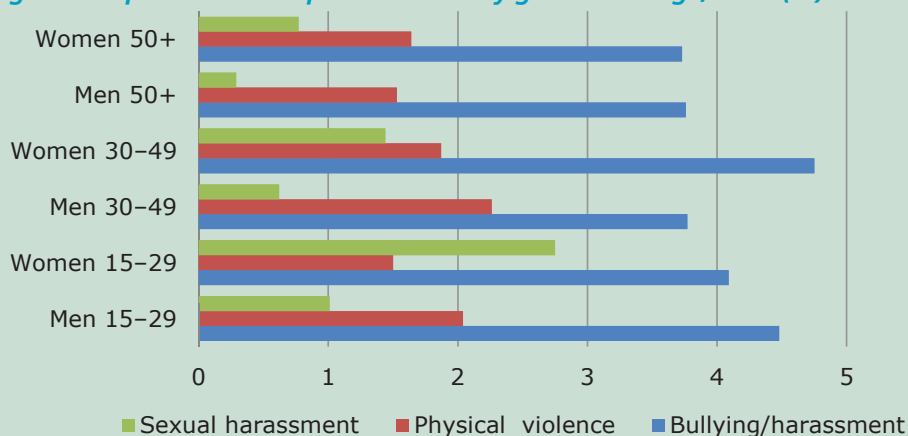
These country variations are often regarded as reflecting different levels of awareness about the problem and willingness to report on the part of the respondents in the different countries rather than necessarily being a reliable, objective measure of prevalence of workplace violence.

Are women more exposed to workplace violence than men?

According to the fifth EWCS data, female workers are consistently more exposed to sexual harassment than their male counterparts, though reported levels for both genders are marginal. Around 3% of young women under the age of 30 report that they have been exposed to sexual harassment in the previous 12-month period, compared to only 1% of men in the same age group.

This comparatively higher level of exposure to sexual harassment among women could be explained by the fact that they may be more willing to report being targeted than men. Therefore, the higher prevalence rates reported by women could result from a mix of factors including actual occurrence of negative behaviour and cultural factors.

Figure 2: Exposure to workplace violence by gender and age, EU27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010



Previous Eurofound research (2003) emphasised the importance of cultural influence, arguing that in the area of sexual harassment at work, for instance, cultural differences may play a major role. In some European countries, sexual harassment is associated with entrenched stereotypes about the roles of men and women in society.

Also, caution should be used when interpreting the results emerging from surveys. For example, multivariate analysis of previous survey data reveals that the higher exposure of workplace violence among women is likely to relate to specific circumstances of female employment such as sector, gender of boss and proportion of employees in customer-oriented roles than gender as such (Eurofound, 2008d).

The picture that emerges from other statistical sources is, indeed, rather mixed. Information collected through EWCO indicates that it is not always the case that women are more exposed to certain forms of workplace violence compared to their male counterparts. For example, according to the already mentioned Danish NFA survey, men appear to be more exposed to bullying than women (Eurofound, 2010a). Overall, 12.9% of male respondents report being sometimes bullied against 7.8% of their female counterparts. The difference in exposure

rate is smaller among those who are exposed to bullying on a daily or weekly basis (1.3% women and 1.7% men). Following the same research approach, Belgian research has found no direct relationship between the probability of being bullied and gender (Eurofound, 2006c).

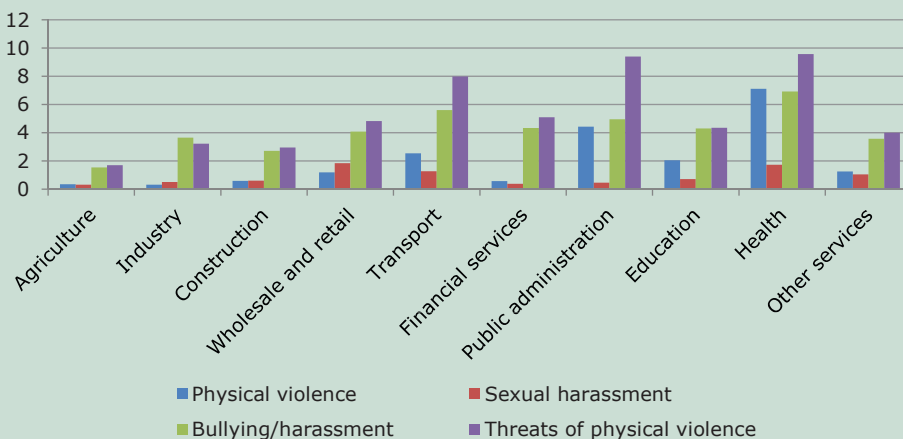
These findings help to highlight the danger of stereotypes and point to the complexity of this phenomenon, emphasising the need to research this issue in greater depth.

Sectors and occupations at higher risk of violence at work

From a sector perspective, the fifth EWCS shows that sectors in which there is a high level of contact with external clients or customers tend also to have the highest levels of incidence of workplace violence. These are health and social work, public administration and, to a lesser extent, education and the transport sector.

The high exposure levels to various forms of workplace violence in these sectors may be partly due to the greater emphasis on customer satisfaction as well as the nature of 'customer facing' occupations which tend to be inherently more demanding and potentially stressful than those with a limited amount of social contact.

Figure 3: Exposure to workplace violence by sector, EU27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

Note: the timeframe of questions on exposure to physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment is 12 months, while for threats of physical violence it is one month.

This may make people working in sectors with high levels of interaction with the public more exposed to abusive behaviour and excessive demands from clients, customers or pupils.

It is often assumed that psychological violence rather than physical violence is typical of white-collar work environments. However, the survey data shows that white-collar workers tend to report comparatively higher levels of exposure to both psychological and physical violence compared to blue-collar workers (see Figure 4).

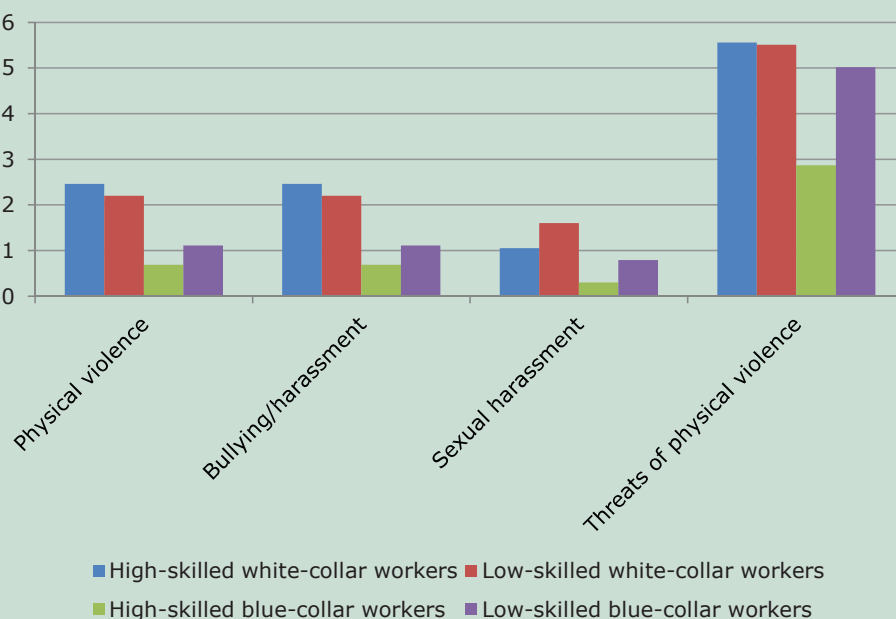
It also should be noted that a high level of occupational skill does not seem to offer protection from exposure to workplace violence. The EWCS survey data reveal that high-skilled white-collar workers are as exposed to threats of physical and psychological violence (including bullying or harassment and sexual harassment) as low-skilled white-collar workers. Due to the importance of power imbalance in bullying or harassment situations, one would intuitively expect those at the lower end of the

organisational hierarchy to more commonly report bullying or harassment.

Of all sectors, health and social work reports the highest incidence of workplace violence and bullying. Around 7% of workers in this sector report having experienced bullying and harassment (against the EU27 average of 4%). The same proportion of workers say that they have been personally subjected to physical violence in the previous 12-month period (against the EU27 average of 2%). Also, exposure levels to threats of physical violence in the previous month are higher than average (10% against the EU27 average of 5%).

Another sector particularly affected by workplace violence is public administration. Among the various forms of workplace violence, exposure to threats of violence is higher than average. Low skilled white-collar workers are more likely to experience threats of physical violence, actual physical violence and bullying than other public administration workers.

Figure 4: Exposure to violence by occupational groups, EU27 (%)

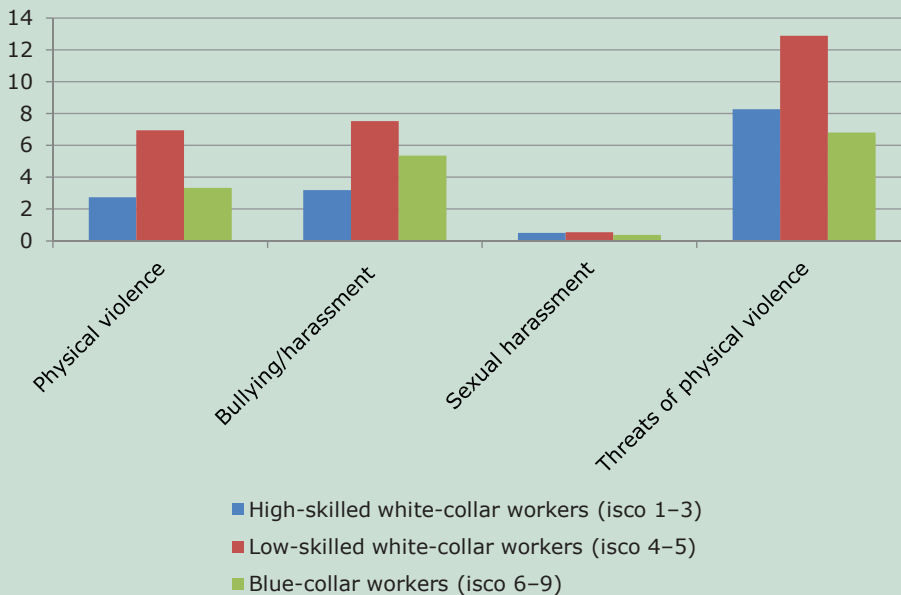


Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

Note: the timeframe of questions on exposure to physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment is 12 months, while for threats of physical violence it is one month.



Figure 5: Exposure to violence by main occupational groups in public administration, EU27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

Note: the timeframe of questions on exposure to physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment is 12 months, while for threats of physical violence it is one month.

Public versus private sector

What does appear from the analysis of fifth EWCS data is that a higher incidence of almost all forms of workplace violence is found among public sector workers than those working in the private sector. Public sector workers are more likely to have experienced threats of violence or actual violence as well as bullying than those in the private sector. This increased risk of exposure to violence facing public sector workers may be due to comparatively higher levels of contact with the public. Also, levels of awareness of the problem among public sector workers may be higher, leading to a greater readiness to report abusive behaviour. That said, it is also important to bear in mind that no sector or occupation is violence-proof or bullying-free.

Workplace violence and negative work-related health effects

Workers exposed to bullying and physical violence report significantly higher levels of

work-related ill-health than those who are not exposed. The most common reported psychosomatic symptoms are depression, stress, sleeping problems and fatigue. Multivariate analysis shows that these effects remain very significant when controlling for other individual, workplace and background variables (occupation, sector, firm size, gender, age, tenure and country).

Findings from national studies reported to EWCS highlight the correlation between workplace violence (particularly bullying) and increased stress levels and reduced psychological well-being. They also shed further light on the consequences of workers subjected to this negative behaviour. For example, the Danish NFA study found that most psychological stress is induced by negative acts which potentially isolate the individual at the workplace and result in unreasonable workloads (Eurofound, 2010a). Similarly, the 2008 Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey highlights the link between

the experience of bullying and psychosomatic symptoms. According to the survey results, the threat of burnout is also significantly connected to workplace bullying (Eurofound, 2009a).

Though psychological violence is, by its nature, more cumulative in its impact than physical violence, data from the fifth EWCS show that its negative health effects measured in terms of absenteeism are equally severe whether associated with physical or psychological violence. Workers who report being exposed to bullying and harassment and physical violence are significantly more likely than average to report absence and they are overrepresented in the category of workers taking 50 days or more off in the previous 12 months.

Previous Eurofound research (2003) argues that the correlation between bullying and absenteeism is relatively weak. In fact, exposure to bullying behaviour may push workers to go to work in order to avoid further retaliation or victimisation from the perpetrators. In line with this argument, evidence from national studies suggests that targets of workplace violence often do not protest as they believe that this would

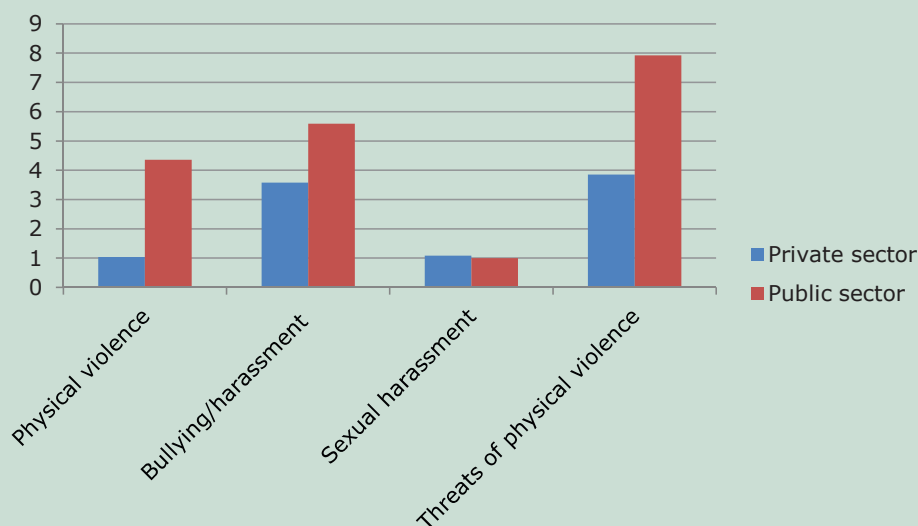
make their situation worse (Eurofound, 2008c; 2007b; 2006b, for example).

It should be also noted that the validity of self-reported measure of bullying or harassment can be questioned and correlations with health outcomes are subject to limitations, for example in relation to other, confounding variables (health history of respondents, predisposition to depression, and so on). Although significant positive correlations were obtained between perceived bullying and self-reported stress symptoms, the cross-sectional design of the survey prevents any conclusion of causal effects between work-related factors and incidence of violence from being drawn. Hypotheses concerning a causal relationship between workplace violence and ill-health are probably better investigated by using different methodologies such as in-depth interviews or focus groups.

The influence of work environment factors on risks

In recent years, various models drawing from behavioural and mainly cognitive perspectives have been used to predict the stressors and anticipate possible outcomes of workplace

Figure 6: Exposure to violence in public versus private sector, EU27 (%)

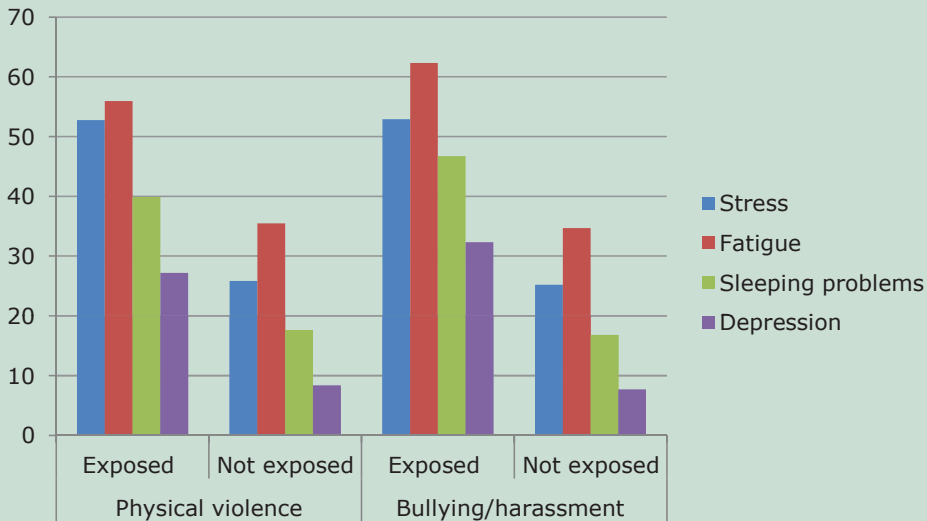


Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

Note: the timeframe of questions on exposure to physical violence, bullying and sexual harassment is 12 months, while for threats of physical violence it is one month.



Figure 7: Most reported health problems associated with bullying and physical violence, EU27 (%)

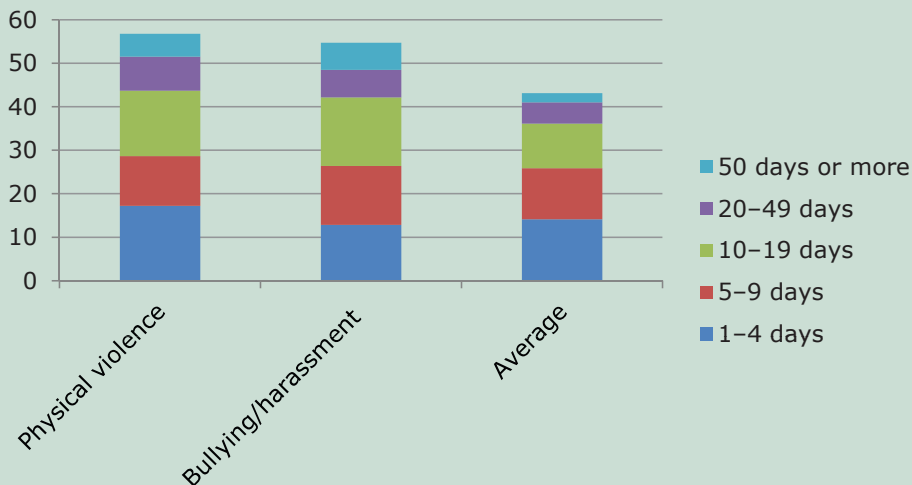


Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

violence (Eurofound, 2003). The emphasis is consistently on the interactive analysis of risk factors at individual, organisational and societal level.

It should be, however, emphasised that individual risk factors play an important role although they cannot be fully captured in a survey on working conditions. At the workplace

Figure 8: Proportion of workers absent and number of days absent due to work-related health problems, EU27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010

level, both the working environment and the specific situation where the task is accomplished can influence the risks of violence. Workplace violence can represent a routine hazard in certain tasks and situations involving working alone and/or at night, with valuables, with people in distress (in hospitals, for example), in environments increasingly open to violence (such as schools), and other conditions of special vulnerability.

For example, in relation to night work, a closer analysis of the fifth EWCS data demonstrates that working at night seems to be a risk factor, particularly in relation to exposure to bullying. The risk of exposure to psychological and physical violence is higher for those working more than five nights per month. However, these results do not prove that working at night and in the evening is dangerous as such, but may just indicate that the particular circumstances of night or evening workers such as taxi drivers or shop assistants in petrol stations may make them more vulnerable to workplace violence.

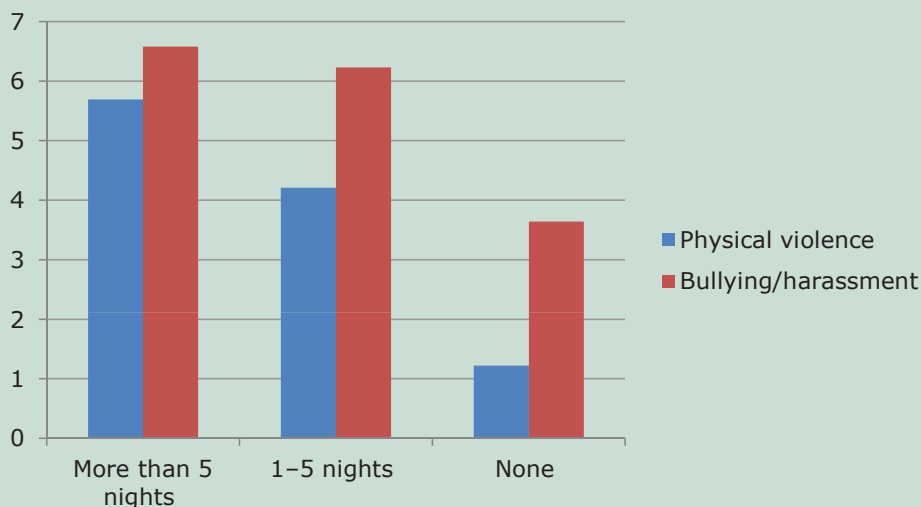
There are other work environment factors that may provide fertile ground for violence in the workplace. For example, a psychosocial work

environment characterised by distrust, stress and unclear working conditions may lead to increased aggression and interpersonal conflicts among employees, which may possibly result in workplace violence and bullying or harassment.

Analysis of the fifth EWCS data suggests that certain features of work organisation are positively associated with higher levels of bullying or harassment, such as high levels of work intensity (tight deadlines or working at very high speed), many constraints on the pace of work, and working in frequent contact with customers, clients and other non-colleagues. Also, those reporting substantial restructuring or reorganisation in the workplace in the last three years are more likely to be exposed to bullying and harassment. A recent report on the impact of the crisis on working conditions (Eurofound, 2013) found that conflict, bullying and violence are on the increase in some European countries and that rising job insecurity plays an important intermediating role in the final effect on well-being at work in terms of stress and harassment.

Evidence from national studies reported to EWCO highlights that workplace violence, particularly bullying, is connected to many

Figure 9: Exposure to workplace violence by number of nights worked in a month, EU27 (%)



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 2010



problems in the work environment, regardless of occupation or sector. For example, the Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey 2008 reveals that bullying is more frequent in workplaces where time pressure is high and there is no sufficient discussion on the work and its associated problems (Eurofound, 2009a). In the same vein, a Eurofound survey data report drawing from French research on psychosocial risk factors at the workplace indicates that hostile behaviour tends to develop in environments with high work demands from superiors and a high work pace (Eurofound, 2009c). More insight into the possible causes of workplace violence comes from research conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Business Ethics at Vilnius University. According to this study, the main reasons for bullying behaviour are ascribed to the lack of appropriate ethical management and inefficient work practices. The most frequently cited factors resulting in bullying were: conflicts among managers and those supervised; a

psychologically volatile work atmosphere; authoritarian, passive and pseudo-democratic management; power imbalances between superiors and subordinates; problems of work organisation; staff demotivation; and disregard for the principle of fairness and respect of employees (Eurofound, 2006d).

Additionally, the Dutch Working Conditions Survey 2009 highlights the importance of social support from colleagues and supervisors. It also reports that conflicts and the prevalence of violence are key determinants of the social climate at the workplace. This is particularly crucial in the context of an ageing workforce. Precisely, the Dutch survey found that the targets of unwanted behaviour from supervisors or colleagues are less willing to work until retirement age, while employees who receive a lot of social support from their supervisors are more likely to say they are willing to continue working until retirement age (Eurofound, 2010b).



Policy pointers



- ➔ The analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey data found that some sectors – such as health and social work, and public administration – are at higher risk of violence and bullying or harassment than others. It may be appropriate to consider sectoral-level interventions to combat workplace violence. Such interventions should take into account the fact that a large female workforce is concentrated in many of the ‘high risk’ sectors and occupations. Moreover, from a sector perspective, survey data also indicate that low levels of exposure to violence and harassment are reported in sectors where traditional physical risks are high like agriculture, construction and manufacturing, for example. A reverse relationship is found in sectors where physical risks are low – namely, health and social work and public administration. This may suggest that the populations affected by workplace violence are distinctive; therefore, a single EU framework directive addressing both sets of risks may not be optimal in dealing with the problem.
- ➔ Moreover, the sectors with a high incidence of psychological violence also tend to exhibit higher levels of physical violence. This may not only suggest that forms of violence are somehow overlapping but also indicate that an integrated and comprehensive approach may be appropriate to combat and prevent both types of violence. However, due to the complexity of the problem, there cannot be a ‘one fit for all’ solution. The full range of causes that generate violence should be considered and reflected in a multilevel approach encompassing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies.
- ➔ All interventions, especially in relation to psychological violence, tend to raise the level of reporting. This does not mean that policy measures have failed; rather the increased level of reporting is a precondition of resolving issues that may have remained previously unspoken or dormant. Increased reporting may reflect greater awareness and sensitivity to the issues.
- ➔ The terminology in the area of workplace violence is often problematic and it is not easy to label what constitutes unacceptable or antisocial behaviour at the workplace. On the one hand, the lack of common definitions of workplace violence makes it difficult to compare the findings from different studies. On the other hand, from a policy perspective, it is difficult to find a trade-off between broad and very precise definitions of workplace violence. In relation to the terminology, the term ‘victim’ and ‘victimisation’ is often used in many studies on workplace violence as well as policy documents. It would be more appropriate to call those affected by abusive and antisocial



behaviour as 'targets' because the term 'victim' reinforces the concept of being vulnerable and disempowered.

- Another important objective is the evaluation and monitoring of proactive interventions as well as the dissemination of best practice examples. Follow-up impact assessment and evaluation of preventive or remedial measures would contribute to determining what measures work well and why. Unfortunately, this is not done systematically, if at all, across Europe.
- What appears to be clear from the statistics is that workplace violence is a serious source of deterioration of health and well-being. The differences in health outcomes between those exposed to psychological violence and those who are not are significant. However, due to the cross-sectional design of the survey, it is not possible to determine to what extent psychosocial work factors contribute to the prevalence of violence, or to what extent the prevalence of violence causes a worsened psychosocial work environment. Studies with a longitudinal design or qualitative research are also needed in order to analyse in greater depth the cause and effect of abusive behaviour.
- The exposure rates of workplace violence emerging from the EWCS refer only to the working population. Those most seriously affected by abusive behaviour at the workplace may have already left the labour market. At the same time, evidence from several countries points to the rise of mental health problems as a cause of long-term incapacity, which is the key reason, after retirement, for withdrawing from the labour market earlier. This trend is also consistent with research showing a general rise in psychosocial risks at the workplace (including violence and bullying or harassment). This may be suggestive of the need to address and prevent workplace violence for the long-term consequences it may have for the individual, the workplace and the community at large.
- It is recognised that workplace violence often stems from a combination of factors

not only associated with personality traits but, above all, organisational problems. The high pace of change, increasing work intensity, and uncertainties with regard to future employment may influence the level of stress, which may provide fertile ground for workplace violence, particularly bullying or harassment.

- Particularly in the current economic climate, it would be appropriate to explore the impact of organisational change (such as major reorganisation or restructuring) on workplace violence. Organisational change may directly encourage or indirectly affect workplace bullying through various stressors such as increased workload, job insecurity, and so on. Until now, sporadic attempts have been made to empirically disentangle the link between organisational change and workplace violence. The key challenge is to anticipate problems and improve work organisation and management practices.
- In order to design appropriate preventive measures, it is important to come to an understanding of the actual causes of workplace violence. This means developing a science-activist-practitioner approach based on a two-way interaction (science must inform practice and vice versa). The common challenge is to solve problems and improve work organisation and management practices as well as create and contribute to theories and models of work organisation.
- In spite of the challenges and yet unresolved issues, a number of factors are contributing to a shared European understanding of the phenomenon, including the increased awareness and public debate, new legislation, the pioneering action of courts, proliferation of collective agreements and initiatives of EU institutions and the social partners. In parallel, the research community is continuing its efforts to monitor the prevalence of workplace violence and to explore the extent to which cultural, linguistic and contextual differences frame the phenomenon.

Further reading

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For more information at European level, see the observatories on the Eurofound website.

'Mutual respect for the dignity of others at all levels within the workplace is one of the key characteristics of successful organisations. That is why harassment and violence are unacceptable.'

Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work, European Social Partners, 26 April 2007

Foundation Findings provide pertinent background information and policy pointers for all actors and interested parties engaged in the current European debate on the future of social policy. The contents are based on Eurofound research and reflect its autonomous and tripartite structure.



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